

Competence in Extension Education Evaluation – What is it? What does capacity building entail?

Over the past years, there has been increasing interest in building Extension's ability to respond to external accountability needs. As we've moved into the "learning organization" mode, we also are seeing increasing interest in using evaluation for learning. Likewise, the new focus on "scholarship" generates increased demand for evaluation and the research skills associated with evaluation. Yet, many of our faculty and staff come to Extension with minimal background or training in evaluation, research methods, or program development.

In Wisconsin, we have been trying over the past years to build a *culture of evaluation* where evaluation is embedded in our programming and is part of our ongoing operations. We are fortunate to have a Vice Chancellor of Extension and a Cooperative Extension Dean and Associate Dean who all value and recognize the importance of evaluation. Evaluation is considered the responsibility of all – it is part of job descriptions, divisional goals, grant awards and reward structures. We are establishing a consistent framework and language that is used by the entire organization. Part of our work now in the Program Development and Evaluation Unit is to improve the quality of our evaluation practice: simply doing evaluation is not good enough; we want to be doing *credible* evaluation.

So, we asked ourselves, "What is 'good' extension program evaluation and what are the core competencies¹ for extension faculty and staff in order to conduct 'good' evaluation?" This discussion is going on in the larger evaluation community as well. The *Program Evaluation Standards* (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994) and the *Guiding Principles of the American Evaluation Association* (AEA, 1995) provide general guidelines for what is "good" (quality) evaluation work. These have provided the groundwork for the current debate in the field about credentialing professional evaluators and efforts to identify essential evaluator competencies (see recent article in *American Journal of Evaluation*, Spring-Summer 2001 by King, Stevahn, Ghore, and Minnema).

¹ Competency is defined as "a sufficient quantity of knowledge, skill and ability to accomplish a particular task or purpose" (UW-Extension Career Development Committee, 2001).

A similar discussion is going on in many Extension organizations around the country that are involved in core competency development: identifying and then building capacity in the knowledge and skills that are needed to be an effective extension educator (see, for example, the North Carolina web site at <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/pods/>). In Wisconsin, a broad-based group of faculty and staff is developing a new comprehensive core competency curriculum based on the specific skills and knowledge held to be essential for extension faculty and staff working in Wisconsin in the 21st century. For the evaluation part of the curriculum, we are using a set of standards that we adapted from *The Program Evaluation Standards*. We started by translating the Joint Standards into a set of more specific, understandable UW-Extension evaluation standards. Our assumption is that if everyone clearly knows and appreciates what is expected in conducting quality evaluation, we are more likely to achieve those expectations. These standards have been compiled into a checklist that we hope will be used when planning an evaluation, conducting an evaluation or when an evaluation is being reviewed to assess its merit (role of tenure and performance review committees). Faculty and staff can also use this list of standards to assess their own knowledge and skills in order to set their individual professional development goals.

We are in the process of finalizing these standards, building consensus and ownership and integrating the standards and expectations across the organization. We are using these standards to determine competencies - the specific knowledge, attitudes and skills needed by our faculty and staff. Then, we can determine what offerings and support are needed, in what sequence, for which role/function in the organization and what other resources exist that people can access in order to develop their evaluation competence. Currently, our evaluation curriculum has multiple offerings, delivered in multiple formats at different times and locations, including self-study modules and on-line resource materials to build competence and proficiencies².

Within our Extension education evaluation community, there have been related discussions for numerous years...perhaps, more specifically around how to share resources and expertise to build nationwide competence. When Mary Andrews was chair of the EEE-TIG, a proposal was drafted, but not finalized, to the Extension Committee on Policy seeking funding to help build nationwide capacity in evaluation. We, in Wisconsin, responded to a system-wide need by conducting national and regional workshops over the past three years on "Providing Leadership for Program Evaluation". But, the requests and needs continue especially among the 1862, 1890 and the 1994 Land Grant Institutions where evaluation resources are limited. Likewise, in an environment of dwindling resources, conceivably we all can profit from collaboration and resource sharing. A group met in Hawaii at the 2000 AEA Conference to discuss working

² Proficiency refers to advanced skill, knowledge or experience that will help an individual carry out a task, position, job with greater ability.

collectively to build evaluation capacity. It may be time again, to rekindle that discussion. The EEE-TIG Board identified evaluation capacity building as a goal for this year. We are discussing the possibility of sponsoring a session on the topic at AEA 2002. But, a fundamental question remains: Is there a set of core competencies for Extension education evaluation around which we would/could build capacity? Or, are organizations, contexts, extension roles and professional “world views” too diverse to come to consensus?

In this first “Hear-if-from-the-Board” for 2002, I am inviting our EEE-TIG membership to engage in a discussion, through our email listserv, around this notion of “Competence in Extension Education Evaluation – What is it? What does capacity building entail?” Let’s see how we can use our collective expertise, experience and insights to begin a conversation that potentially will have meaning to our extension-wide system. Any observations and thoughts are welcome. Simply send your comments to the listserv -- eee-tig@ext.msstate.edu -- and we will see if we can stimulate discussion and learning similar to what transpires on EVALTALK around a specific topic. Roger Rennekamp promises in his March “Hear-if-from-the-Board” to add to this dialogue.

References:

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King, Jean, Laurie Stevahn, Gail Ghere, Jane Minnema. 2001. Toward a taxonomy of essential evaluator competencies. American Journal of Evaluation, 22:2, Spring-Summer, pp 229-247.

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